How the Family-Run Underground Museum Became One of L.A.'s Most Vital Cultural Forces

by Diane Solway
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Photographs by Deana Lawson; Davis, Childs-Davis, and Anyanwu styled by Sharone Blades.

The night after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, *Moonlight* director Barry Jenkins made his way to the Underground Museum, a buzzy cultural hub and alternative art space in the predominantly black-and-Latino neighborhood of Arlington Heights, in Central Los Angeles. Walking into the small storefront space for a post-screening Q&A, he saw few viewers inside and assumed that distress over the previous night's outcome had made everyone stay home. Then he stepped outside into the garden and found 250 people

packed tightly together on blankets on the lawn. They had just watched *Moonlight* on the outdoor screen and were eager to talk—not about craft or behind-the-scenes stuff, as they typically did at Jenkins's Q&A's, he says, but about how they felt. Jenkins recalls it as the most meaningful night of the movie's rollout.

"I was struck by what a diverse crowd it was—tons of black folks, people from the neighborhood, white, Latino, Asian. And I thought, This is America," says the director, whose film went on to win the Oscar for best picture. "Nothing could replicate the feeling that we had that night. It was almost like group therapy, all of us just out there under the stars, witnessing this thing we'd made and using it to bring us together."

Cofounded in 2012 by the painter Noah Davis, a rising L.A. art star, and his wife, Karon, a sculptor, the Underground Museum began as a row of storefront spaces that doubled as the couple's studio and home. Though the Studio Museum in Harlem, in New York, and the Rubell Family Collection, in Miami, had acquired some of Davis's moody figurative paintings, Davis wanted to sidestep the gallery system, preferring to bring museum-quality art to a community that had no access to it "within walking distance," as he once put it.

Soon, he and Karon were opening their doors to anyone passing by, and Noah was curating eclectic shows—of his own work and of others', including his older brother, Kahlil Joseph, an artist and filmmaker who created music videos and would go on to direct videos for Kendrick Lamar and Beyoncé. Noah was 32 when he died of a rare type of soft tissue cancer, in 2015; by then he had forged a unique partnership with the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA), which had agreed to loan the Underground Museum works from its permanent collection for a series of shows that Davis would curate. (He was able to work on the first one, and left behind plans for 18 others.)

These days, guided by Karon, Kahlil, and other family members, the Underground Museum is an anomaly in this era of starchitect-designed private museums and foundations: a modest, black-family-run art collective whose convening power is likely the envy of every cultural institution in the country. Beyoncé, the artist David Hammons, and the actress and activist Amandla Stenberg have all been spotted in its purple-themed garden; John Legend and Solange Knowles have launched albums there; and the director Raoul Peck visited to screen his acclaimed James Baldwin documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*. Equal parts art gallery, hangout space, film club, and speakeasy, the UM, as it's affectionately known, focuses on black excellence, not struggle, though it's been nimble enough to address recent racial turmoil by creating a forum for talks by Angela Davis and by Black Lives Matter cofounder Patrisse Cullors. Jenkins likens the museum to "a salon you would have found during the Harlem Renaissance," in the 1920s and '30s. "There's something coming out of that place that is so radical in its potential that you can feel it," concurs the L.A.-based sculptor Thomas Houseago. "And it draws a mix of people that I don't find anywhere else in the world. As a white artist, it's not like, 'Hey, what are you doing here?' It's, 'Great, you're here! More hands.' "

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If you don't know what you're looking for, however, you might be forgiven for walking past its unassuming entrance, which intentionally blends into the streetscape of carpet warehouses and tattoo parlors. Step inside and you're immediately welcomed into an intimate bookshop, curated by Noah's mother, Faith Childs-Davis, a former teacher who directs the L.A. branch of Tony Bennett's arts-education nonprofit, Exploring the Arts. Found discarded chairs, reupholstered in Dutch wax prints, offer discreet spots to chat; vintage albums, culled from Noah and Karon's collection, are often playing on the Crosley turntable. In the exhibition spaces, the current show, "Artists of Color" (through February), features a mix of pieces from MOCA's permanent collection and other loans—providing a dialogue between artists of different periods and walks of life. But here, too, the vibe is chill. Short quotes by each artist are placed near their works, and the introductory wall text is signed, love, the um. In one gallery, a 1960s light installation by Dan Flavin faces a neon text piece by Los Angeles artist EJ Hill that reads WE DESERVE TO SEE OURSELVES ELEVATED. A long wooden bar in another gallery leads to the backyard garden, the site of an organic food market and yoga classes, where an installation by Diana Thater uses clear colored vinyl to create a giant tunnel of alternating hues.

The extended UM family, including collaborators, board members, staff, and friends, in the museum's Purple Garden.
Photographs by Deana Lawson

The story of the Underground Museum really begins with Noah and Kahlil's father, Keven Davis, a charismatic sports-and-entertainment lawyer whose clients included Wynton Marsalis and Ludacris, and who put special stock in empowering talented young people. Early in his career, he agreed to work pro bono for two aspiring tween tennis players named Venus and Serena Williams, believing, in 1990, that two African-American sisters from the tough L.A. neighborhood of Compton could train on public courts and rise to be champions in a country-club sport. (Ten years later, he negotiated Venus's $40 million Reebok deal, then the biggest endorsement contract ever for a female athlete.) The Davis brothers grew up in Seattle, where prominent figures regularly joined them at the family dinner table. Their mother encouraged their interest in art: Noah studied painting at the Cooper Union, in New York; Kahlil pursued film in L.A., working for a time with the director Terrence Malick. When Noah joined him in L.A. around 2004, he found studio space in a

building in Boyle Heights, where Kahlil, Houseago, Aaron Curry, and Piero Golia were making art. “You can’t imagine the amazing group of people there,” says Houseago. “No one had any money; the L.A. art scene hadn’t taken off. Noah would come in and ask, ‘Hey, can I watch you work?’ He had this charming thing where he’d say, ‘I’m going to build this museum. We should bring together art, entertainment, music. Let’s do something!’ I was more European and isolated, and I was like, ‘What the f--- are you talking about?’ When I visited the Underground Museum after he died, I realized, ‘My god, he meant business!’ ”

In 2005, Noah met Karon. She had attended film school at USC and grown up in a showbiz family in Manhattan and New Jersey—her father is the Broadway star Ben Vereen, and her mother, Nancy, was a ballet dancer—but she had never thought about showing as an artist until Noah encouraged her. Soon they began making work together. The couple married in 2008, during Art Basel Miami Beach, when Noah was included in the Rubell Family Collection’s “30 Americans” exhibition of works by African-American artists. At 25, Noah was the youngest in the show, which included renowned figures such as Kara Walker and Hammons. Henry Taylor, another of the featured artists, notes that even as Davis’s career was taking off, he “had enough sense not to get screwed like so many artists of color.” The two loved hanging out together, and occasionally watched each other paint. “That guy was a badass,” adds Taylor, pulling his portrait of Davis, wearing lime green shorts, from a stack in his studio. “He wasn’t afraid to fuck with things, and he was so curious, not just thinking about his own work. He was continually opening me up to other artists. He made me step up my game.”

Davis’s father’s death, of brain cancer in 2011, at 53, spurred Noah to make a home for his ideas, using the money he inherited. It was his dad’s deathbed wish that his sons create a community platform for connection; he talked to them about it for months. “Everyone told us we were crazy,” says Karon, recalling how she and Noah moved into the storefront space, knocked down walls themselves, opened a community library, and spoke of creating “an incubator for artists, activists, and thinkers” while living there with their young son, Moses, now 7.

Henry Taylor, in his studio in Los Angeles.
Photographs by Deana Lawson

"Imitation of Wealth," one of the first installations Noah showed, in 2013, included iconic artworks that he had re-created, including a Marcel Duchamp bottle rack and a Jeff Koons vacuum cleaner piece. "Nobody would lend us work," says Karon. "We asked collectors and gallerists, and it was always, 'This neighborhood? No.' So Noah was like, 'We'll just make it ourselves.' " The show attracted notice from curators, critics, and other artists. Several art world insiders assumed the work was the real deal, she recalls, since it was the same vacuum cleaner model that Koons had used, which Noah had bought on Craigslist for $70. "They'd say, 'How'd you guys get a Koons?' It was like the joke was on them."

For another show, "The Oracle," Davis featured sculptures by Taylor alongside 19th-century carvings from Sudan and his brother's video *m.A.A.d.*, a lush reverie about Compton inspired by songs from Kendrick Lamar's autobiographical album, *Good Kid*, *m.A.A.d*. City. Lamar had tapped Kahlil to create the visuals for his 2013 tour opening for Kanye West; while Kahlil was editing the footage out of an office at the UM, Noah convinced him to adapt the project for a video installation to be included in "The Oracle." Soon after it opened, Helen Molesworth came by to check out the film. She had just taken up her new post as chief curator at MOCA, and both she and its new director, Philippe Vergne, were looking for ways to reinvent the institution. Molesworth immediately put *m.A.A.d*. on MOCA's 2015 exhibition lineup. (Kahlil's film *Fly Paper*, his rumination on Harlem and family, is currently on view at the New Museum, in New York.) As she grew closer to Kahlil and Noah on

subsequent visits, Noah proposed that MOCA loan works to the Underground Museum; the idea struck Molesworth as so boldly hopeful that she couldn't help but recommend it to Vergne.

"We both said yes immediately," she says. "It was a way to do something different. The conversations I was having at the UM I was not going to have at MOCA. Conventional cultural institutions, whether it's fashion or movies or museums, they're born of 300 years of whiteness. So it's not a simple thing to say, 'OK, now we're going to open the doors, and black people are going to come in, and it's all going to be the same.' Those spaces were by, for, and about white people. So what does it mean to really shift your orientation and give away some of the authority? We didn't say, 'You guys play in our sandbox,' but rather, 'We give you control, and we'll let the artwork that is in our care be interpreted and used differently than we would interpret it.' My mantra with them all along has been, Don't get in their way."

A self-portrait by Deana Lawson for *W*.
Photographs by Deana Lawson; hair and makeup by Hinako at The Wall Group; photography assistant: Freddy Villalobos

The plan was for Noah to review what Molesworth dubbed "the bible," the binder containing every work in MOCA's collection. When he was hospitalized, she brought it to him; during the next year, as his illness overtook him, he drafted lists of exhibition ideas. On August 29, 2015, the day he died, an installation of his "Imitation of Wealth"

coincidentally opened in MOCA's Storefront space. His death seemed to catalyze the momentum around his blueprint. Karon built the UM's Purple Garden, and Kahlil and his wife, Onye Anyanwu, developed the film program; they all reached out to friends. Though Noah wasn't there to see it, his second MOCA collaboration, "Non-Fiction," which focused on violence against the black body, made a resounding case for his thriving experiment. In addition to selections from MOCA, artists themselves offered up works, among them Robert Gober and Kerry James Marshall, whose acclaimed 2017 retrospective Molesworth had co-organized. Hammons, meanwhile, gave his blessing to re-create his iconic hooded sweatshirt piece (the replica was to be destroyed once the show concluded). On its closing night this past April, Theaster Gates performed with the Black Monks of Mississippi for a crowd of a thousand, "and then," recalls Karon, "we had a crazy party."

Now the UM has a director, Megan Steinman; a board; and growing private and institutional support. Next up, beginning in the spring of 2018, is a solo show by the artist Deana Lawson, another UM regular, whose photographs, many made during a UM residency, were paired with paintings by Taylor in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, and who is responsible for the portraits in this story. "The thing has taken off in such an extraordinary way," says Molesworth, now a board member. Asked how she measures the success of their ongoing partnership, she suggests that the UM has already left its imprint. "When the history of this moment in the L.A. art world is written," she ventures, "people will say, 'The Underground Museum? That shit was dope.' "